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The Baghdad Railway

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The Baghdad Railway

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This paper explores the historical development of the Baghdad Railway in the context of international affairs during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Viewed from the perspectives of businessmen and diplomats, the Railway was an expensive venture with considerable economic and strategic potential. This report provides an overview of the Railway project amid growing apprehension in Europe and Great Britain about German designs.

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The Baghdad Railroad

It is unpleasant to contemplate the construction of a railway traversing the whole of Asia Minor and terminating in the Persian Gulf, in which Great Britain takes no part or share.¹

Despite the classic tone of understatement, Sir Nicholas Roderick O'Connor, British Ambassador to Turkey, was expressing alarm and outrage in his 1901 letter to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The negotiations for the Baghdad railway officially begin in 1898 in Constantinople when Kaiser Wilhelm visited the Sultan Abdul Hamid in the Ottoman capital. From the German perspective, the Baghdad Railway was a chance to challenge the British Empire and the large British naval force. The goal was for the railway to become the fastest way to reach Asia from Europe, directly challenging the British navy and the Suez Canal. This railway also concerned the British because of the possibility of the railway becoming a dominant trade route and connection to India.²

However, there were other perspectives, too. The German railway engineer known as the “Father of the Baghdad Railway,” Wilhelm von Pressel did not understand why the railroad had become such an object of contention in both the

¹ Gooch, G P, and Harold W. V. Temperley. *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*.

² Peter Hopkirk, *Like Hidden Fire*, 21-22

Ottoman Empire and Europe.³ According to Pressel, the railway was “an ordinary transaction” that “benefited both the Ottoman Empire and the nation that built it.”⁴

This paper will begin with a brief overview of the context prior to the development of the Railway. Then, the report will look at the Railway’s importance through the eyes of key personalities at the time of its construction. The report will conclude with a discussion of the importance of railroad transportation in the Middle East in the early 20th century and with ideas for further research.

Part I: Historical Setting Surrounding the Development of the Railway

The Development of the Modern Railway

The invention of the steam engine and its adaptation to a mechanical device that could move from place to place brought about social and economic changes in history of mankind comparable to the advent of the wheel at the dawn of the Stone Age.⁵

Before discussing the details of the Berlin-Baghdad railroad specifically, it is a helpful exercise to discuss both the development of the locomotive and a brief history of Ottoman railways. The origin of steam railways is related to the growing coal industry in the eighteenth century. Between 1700 and 1830 the production of

³ McMurry, Frank M. *The Geography of the Great War*. New York: Macmillan, 1919.
<http://freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~worldwarone/WWI/TheGeographyOfTheGreatWar/>, 18

⁴ McMurry, 18.

⁵ Cookridge, E H. *Orient Express, the Life and Times of the World's Most Famous Train*. New York: Random House, 1978, 3.

coal grew from 3 million to 30 million tons.⁶ Coal reemerged as a primary source of energy after the water wheel's use decreased after 1810. This is significant in the development of the rail because, with the increased demand for coal in the market, the need for new innovations to transport the coal grew steadily.⁷ The first metal surface rails were produced to transport tubs of coal underground and overland. Coal was carried and distributed on these "four-foot waggonways" by horses as early as 1760. "By the end of the eighteenth century waggonways were firmly established as part of Britain's transport system. Their contribution to the growth of the coal industry- in facilitating the extension of coal working by containing rising marginal costs- had been an important one."⁸

Transport improvements play a vital role in the economic growth of any economy. In the beginning, railways were seen as secondary to water transport with the goal of serving only to deliver rails to the water. However, as new technological innovations were introduced, such as the steam locomotive, the use of the railway was seen "as an independent transport facility."⁹ The eighteenth century Industrial Revolution and development of the railroad, which began in Britain, became a turning point for many nations around the world. From the world's first steam locomotive that ran in Northeast England between Stockton and Darlington, just

⁶ Kirby, M W. *The Origins of Railway Enterprise: The Stockton and Darlington Railway, 1821-1863*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993., 9.

⁷ Kirby, 9.

⁸ Kirby, 15.

⁹ Kirby, 17.

eleven miles, in September 1825, to the thousand mile tracks developed in the 1830s in America, the Railroad Age spurred massive excitement around the world.¹⁰

“The invention of locomotives further facilitated the advancement of European colonizing nations in Asia and Africa” for many reasons.¹¹ “Railways did not only fuel the advancement of European colonizers,” but also increased the speed and urgency with which investors looked at the world’s global business potential. The business of railroading both made and ruined fortunes, Investors viewed the Ottoman Empire as a new venue for business, “arguably very productive for both sides.”

In understanding the politics at play in the new locomotive business, the perspective of investors and government on all sides prove illuminating. Railroading became very political, particularly Ottoman railways. The first foreign entrepreneurs, who wanted to work in the railroad business in the Ottoman Empire, were regarded with little care by the Ottoman government. Only later, after struggling with financial difficulties did the Ottoman government value finding a way to connect its empire and consolidate power.¹²

During the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz (1861-1876), “the Ottomans laid the groundwork for the line between Istanbul and Anatolia, with the route starting from

¹⁰ Cookridge, E. H. 1978. *Orient Express, the life and times of the world's most famous train*. New York: Random House, 4.

¹¹ Hülügü, M. Metin. 2010. *The Hejaz Railway: the construction of a new hope*. New York: Blue Dome Press., 1.

¹² Hülügü, xii.

the Asian side of Istanbul, in Kadikoy, all the way to Pendik in 1871.”¹³ The sultan wanted to serve the densely populated region of Marmara and to extend the rail to Mesopotamia. However, the Ottoman government was unable to finance the project itself. The first official involvement by foreign investors occurred in April 1880, when the Ottoman government granted a British company the rights to operate a railway project in Ottoman territory.¹⁴

In subsequent years two thirds of all foreign capital invested in the Ottoman Empire was for railway projects. “From 1856 to 1922, the Ottoman Empire built 8,434 kilometers of railways with funds secured from European sources in Anatolian and Rumeli.”¹⁵ The only railway that was financed only by the Ottoman government was the Hejaz railway. The Hejaz and Baghdad railways were the two most important, and political railways in the Ottoman Empire.

While the focus of this paper is the Baghdad Railway, the Hejaz Railway provides an interesting source of comparison. What was the impact of the railways on the Ottomans themselves? The investment itself, the construction process, and how the operations of the railroads affected the population and markets of the Ottoman Empire. Was the development of railways in the Ottoman Empire beneficial to the Ottomans in terms of agricultural production, exports, and transportation of goods, people and supplies? Did the people adjust to the new construction projects? Or did the railways only serve investors and European

¹³ Hülagü, xii.

¹⁴ Hülagü, xii.

¹⁵ Hülagü, xv.

businessmen? When analyzing a project of this scope, any consequences of the development (particularly in an empire not known for experiencing industrialization like the West) must be kept in mind.

Most railway development in the Ottoman Empire was contracted out to European powers such as Germany, Austria, France, or the British. After the Crimean War the attitude of the Ottoman Empire towards railways shifted: the Sultan and army realized that the deficiency of the empire was in its transportation. The Ottoman Empire possessed vast territory as well as waterways for transport, yet these were scattered all over the empire with no means for connecting them. "In the case of the Ottoman empire," their solution to the problem of transportation "was the construction of railway lines" in the same vein as the Roman Empire building surfaced roads.¹⁶

The Ottoman Empire had excellent ports and a wealth of ability when it came to transportation to and from its shores. However, this was limited to the Bosphorous Straits, which divided Constantinople, and the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. This was an important link from the Ottoman Empire to Europe and Asia, however the extensive use of these ports for lasting value was limited due to the lack of dependable roads.

The topic of railroads in the Ottoman Empire can be studied from many different angles, in terms of trade and the economy or as related to the military and

¹⁶ Karkar, Yaqub N. 1972. *Railway development in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1914*. New York: Vantage Press., 62.

international diplomacy. Methods of transporting goods and materials were essential to the Industrial Revolution in Europe with new mass production in factories and mills and new discoveries of raw materials.¹⁷ The economic and political history of railroads not only increased speed and ease of transportation, but also extended the political reach of nations. The Berlin-Baghdad Railroad proves to be an interesting case in terms of expansion politically, economically, and diplomatically into the Ottoman Empire.

European writings about the Baghdad Railroad generally depict the rail as a way for Europe to try to save the Ottoman Empire, the “sick man of Europe” whose ambition had led to the decline. European analyses of the Railway generally point to the rail as a political venture by the Germans and even as a flashpoint of WWI. However, an examination of how Sultan Abdulhamid II worked out the plan for the railroad and of his view of its development provides a different perspective from the majority of the literature. In Morris Jastrow’s account of the Railway, considered one of the best accounts of the rail at the time when published in November 1917, he argues that the story of the Baghdad Railway illustrates the crux of the *Eastern Question* and points to diplomatic intrigue and mutual distrust between the East and West.¹⁸ Writing shortly after the end of WWI, he contended that:

After the world has been made safe for democracy, it will be the chief task of the coming Fourth Conference to keep it safe, by giving the first

¹⁷ E.H. Cookridge, *Orient Express; Life and Times of the World’s Most Famous Train*, 3.

¹⁸ Jastrow, Morris. 1917. *The war and the Bagdad Railway; the story of Asia Minor and its relation to the present conflict*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 151.

consideration to the claims of every people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.¹⁹

The Great War to make the world a safer place for democracy was intended to present a new era of international diplomacy and cooperation. Based on the principles presented by Sir Edward Grey in October 1916, Jastrow explained:

The supremacy of right over force... and the free development under conditions of equality and conformity to their own genius, of all the states, large and small, who constitute civilized humanity,

Jastrow assumed that if this spirit prevailed, the Eastern Question would rightly be solved.²⁰

Literature about the railway written shortly after or before the Great War point to the rail as a tangible effect of the so-called Eastern Question. At the time of its construction rhetoric surrounding the rail was largely about colonialism and about Germany's efforts to take control of the rail. The rail represented a struggle for supremacy among European powers. However, a look at the way in which Sultan Abdulhamid II carefully used the rivalry among European powers to his own advantage presents a different side to the story. At the time Sultan Abdulhamid II took the throne in 1876, there were little over 100 miles of railway tracks in the massive Ottoman Empire.²¹

¹⁹ Jastrow, 152.

²⁰ Jastrow, 152.

²¹ Munayyir, Muḥammad 'Ārif ibn Aḥmad, and Jacob M. Landau. 1971. *The Hejaz Railway and the Muslim pilgrimage; a case of Ottoman political propaganda*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press., 10

The geography of the Ottoman Empire, extending from parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as three thousand miles of coast at the time of the Crimean War, made it an important and strategic source for trade and commercial relations. However, the large empire struggled to control such a vast territory from the center. When Sultan Abdulhamid II came to the throne he was “hostile to liberal or constitutional ideas,” but also

by no means entirely opposed to reform and Westernization in which, judiciously selected and applied, he saw the means of reinforcing both the Ottoman Empire and his own position in it.²²

Sources on Adulhamid II are generally conflicted when discussing the legacy of the sultan.

After being granted the permission to finance and construct the railway, the German syndicate’s efforts to construct the “Baghdad bahn” were not without challenges. Many financial, political, and geographic challenges stood in the way of its construction, which began shortly after the concession was granted in 1903. The first section of the railway extended approximately 200 kilometers from Konia to Bulgurlu and was built without difficulty on a very flat terrain.²³ A second section of the railway was not built until 1910 due to the challenging terrain.²⁴ While a large part of the railway was built before World War I, the rail was not completed by the outbreak of war.

²² KarKar, 20.

²³ KarKar, 73.

²⁴ KarKar, 73.

The development of German involvement in the Ottoman Empire was strikingly larger. From 1880 to 1914, German investment grew from zero to over 600 million marks, most of which was invested in the Baghdad Railway.²⁵ This large investment drew great attention from rival powers, who were concerned to see how railroads were changing balances of power and world economies.

The large bureaucracy of the Ottoman government created challenges for foreign investors, who were all struggling to gain favor and concessions from the Ottoman officials to build rails. High turnover rate of Ottoman officials made it difficult to develop the necessary business relationships to follow through with negotiations. Successful negotiations, particularly for smaller foreign companies, often took a significant amount of time.

In terms of the economic value for foreign investors, the German case provides an interesting example. The German government aggressively pursued its railway interests in the Ottoman Empire and expended a great deal of time and resources in the project. It is interesting to point out that “trade figures between 1900 and 1912 showed a marked increase in exports and imports,” “For 1900-1901: Exports: \$583,000; 1912; 4,636,000.”²⁶ While it is true that these figures illustrate a rising number of imports between Germany and the Ottoman Empire, the development of these railroads also increased the imports and exports to those countries, which were not involved in building the railroad. For example, “a look a

²⁵ KarKar, 74.

²⁶ KarKar, 90.

trade relations between the United States and the Ottoman Empire between 1850 and 1914 shows a steady improvement,” and that “total trade has risen from \$596,000 in 1850 to \$17,514,558 in 1914.”²⁷

The risks involved with building the railroad were difficult to assess because there were so many factors involved. In addition, because the railroad business was so new, it was hard for outside businesses and countries to decide whether or not and, if so, how to become involved in the Baghdad Railway project. Before moving on and discussing the uncertainty further, it is important to review the context and relations of the key nations of Germany and Britain with the Ottoman Empire.

From the 1890s on, Germany’s efforts to extend its sphere of influence in the Ottoman Empire affected its relationship with Britain. The Railway was one of the most bold and ambitious ventures of Germany in the Ottoman Empire.

Germany and the Ottoman Empire

The relationship between Germany and the Ottoman Empire became a central point of focus for the world on the eve of World War I. As the economy of the Ottoman Empire declined, surrounding European nations looked to become increasingly involved in Ottoman affairs and thus dove into “mutual competition for political and economic influence” in the region.²⁸ Some scholars argue that this

²⁷ KarKar, 91.

²⁸ Trumpener, Ulrich. 1968. *Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press., 3.

situation, “contributed substantially to the general atmosphere of distrust which made the First World War possible.”²⁹

Imperial Germany remained cautious in its attitude toward the Ottoman Empire, but during the 1880s, “particularly after Bismarck’s dismissal, Berlin gradually abandoned its policy of restraint.”³⁰ German banks, businessmen, industrial firms, and railway companies all looked to secure interest in the Ottoman Empire.³¹ In the political realm, nationalist groups, such as the Pan-German League, began to voice positive support for involvement in the Ottoman Empire.³²

In addition to investing in the railways in the Ottoman Empire in the decades leading up to WWI, Germany’s involvement in the Ottoman Empire was “characterized by heavy investment in the areas of municipal transportation, electric utilities, agriculture” mining, and drastically increased trade.³³ A key point to remember is that the German-Ottoman alliance of 1914 was not a carefully drawn out plan, as these investments might suggest, but was rather, a “hastily made arrangement.”³⁴ During the War, the Baghdad railway played a vital role in providing a “halfway viable transportation link between Constantinople and the various Eastern theaters of war.”³⁵

²⁹ Trumpener, 6.

³⁰ Trumpener, 4.

³¹ Trumpener, 4.

³² Trumpener, 5.

³³ Trumpener, 8-9.

³⁴ Trumpener, 16.

³⁵ Trumpener, 288.

The Ottoman government implemented a policy designed to balance the involvement of all great powers in its realm. The British and French also had large investments in the Ottoman Empire. The French, for example, held fifty-nine percent of the “Ottoman Public Debt, which was administered by an international agency on behalf of the Porte’s creditors by 1914.”³⁶ Germany and Britain divided up what remained, making it about twenty percent each. Germany’s total capital investments in the Ottoman Empire paled when compared to the French that by 1914 nearly exceeded 900 million gold francs, while the total German investment was between 500 and 600 million gold francs.³⁷

The British and the Ottoman Empire

“Geo-politics were a significant aspect of the Ottoman Empire’s relevance to the British.”³⁸ The prominent positioning of the Ottoman Empire in control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorous, the two narrow straits “on which communications between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea were dependent,” made it impossible for the British to ignore the Ottoman Empire. As other powerful nations invested in the empire, the British felt inclined to do so as well.

Sultan Abdulhamid and other Ottoman sultans tried to maintain diplomatic neutrality, and tried to use this international competition to their advantage. For the British, however, this was a necessary evil that had to be dealt with. Britain and the

³⁶ Trumpener, 11.

³⁷ Trumpener, 10.

³⁸ Burman, John. 2010. *Britain's relations with the Ottoman Empire during the embassy of Sir Nicholas O'Connor to the Porte, 1898-1908*. Istanbul: The Isis Press, 14.

Ottoman Empire had officially formalized diplomatic ties in 1583, so during the twentieth century, in many respects the formal diplomatic activity between London and Istanbul were simply a continuation of this formal affair.³⁹

Map Showing the Proposed Route of the Berlin to Baghdad Railway

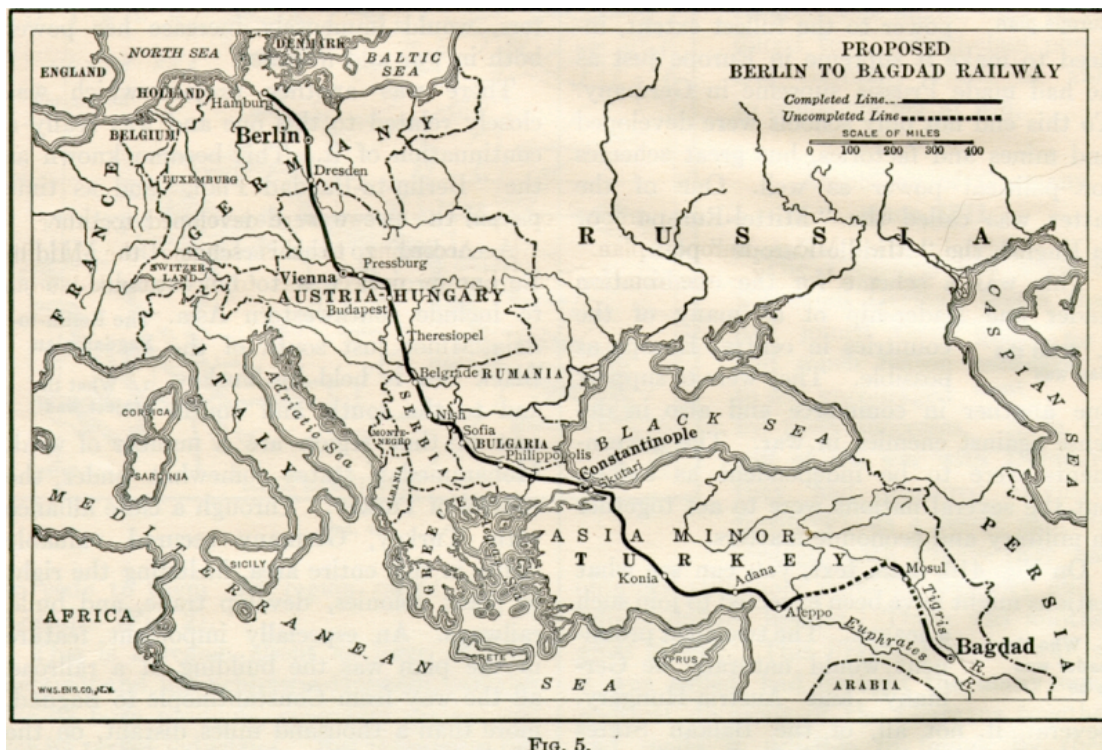


Figure 1: From the Geography of the Great War by Frank M. McMurry. Note: The Completed Line is represented by a solid black line. Uncompleted Line by dashed lines.⁴⁰

³⁹ Burman 41-2.

⁴⁰ McMurry, Frank M. "The Geography of the Great War." New York: Macmillan, 1919. <http://freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~worldwarone/WWI/TheGeographyOfTheGreatWar/>

In 1836 the British Colonel Chesney first suggested building a railway along this route, and he persisted in trying to raise investor interest in the project up until the Crimean War (1854-55).⁴¹ However, nothing was accomplished until 1871, when the Ottoman government completed the first 29 miles from Constantinople to Izmir.

The same year, German official and railway engineer, Wilhelm von Pressel arrived in Istanbul and became “enthralled with the prospect of building a modern railway through Anatolia and Mesopotamia” and recognized the need for research and planning.⁴² He realized that the project was large and complicated. To construct a railway that “linked Istanbul, Ankara, and Baghdad to the Persian Gulf port of Basra” would require outside financing and support.⁴³ But at that time investing in the Ottoman Empire was seen as too risky for most investors.

This was also the conclusion of the British although an 1872 commission did recommend the Baghdad Railway for its significant strategic importance as a second line of communication (in addition to the Suez Canal).⁴⁴ The perils of making a major investment in this area were underlined by the Ottoman Empire’s declaration of bankruptcy in 1876 just before Abdulhamid II became Sultan.⁴⁵

⁴¹ <http://www.engrailhistory.info/r100.html>

⁴² McMurray, 18.

⁴³ McMurray, 18.

⁴⁴ <http://www.engrailhistory.info/r100.html>

⁴⁵ McMurray, 16.

The bold vision of a railway to Baghdad continued to be discussed by many countries, including France, Russia and Britain. The Ottoman government also considered various internal proposals.

In a report submitted to the Sultan in 1880 by the Minister of Public Works, the Baghdad Railway took first place among the various public undertakings under consideration. The project had no better fate than the others, including those, which had agitated public opinion between 1878 and 1886. Among them was that promoted by a syndicate under the chairmanship of the Duke of Sutherland, who sent an expedition headed by the great explorer Cameron to map out the line.⁴⁶

The British were mostly focused upon the Suez Canal, and other countries were not interested in or able to undertake such a large-scale project.

With the widening of the Suez Canal in 1886, Great Britain was confirmed in her withdrawal from the field. Although France had great political and commercial interests in Turkey, she confined her railway activities to lines of a more local character.⁴⁷

However, the project was certainly back for discussion in 1888, when the Sultan granted a concession to Germany to construct the next step of the Railway from Izmir to Ankara.⁴⁸

Kaiser Wilhelm's 1898 visit to Constantinople

Negotiations for the railway began in earnest ten years later in 1898 after Kaiser Wilhelm visited Sultan Abdulhamid in Constantinople. It must be explained

⁴⁶ "The Taurus Express: A Romantic Journey through Asia Minor,"
<http://www.engrailhistory.info/r100.html>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

that German political officials were not inclined to sponsor any of the railroad because of the risk. Otto von Bismarck seriously questioned the value of risking an investment in the Ottoman Empire and left the investment and gamble to private German businessmen and financiers.⁴⁹ Bismarck's policies of shying away from foreign investment sharply contrasted with those of Wilhelm II who travelled to Istanbul in 1898 and met personally with Sultan Abdulhamid.

Bismarck tried to persuade the Emperor to abandon his visit to Constantinople and wrote in a memorandum found in the files of the Foreign Office:

... as to the approaching journey of the Kaiser to the Orient, I said that the reason for the visit to Constantinople lay only in the wish of our Majesties not to come home from Athens without having seen Constantinople; Germany had no political interests in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean; and it was accordingly impossible that the visit of our Majesties should take on a political complexion.⁵⁰

Wilhelm's desire for more expansionist policies led to "rifts that developed between Bismarck and Wilhelm, which eventually led to Bismarck's resignation in 1890."⁵¹

While not approved by Bismarck, some Germans surely looked favorably upon a budding relationship with a land rich in oil, metal, and resources capable of helping Germany become less reliant on other foreign markets.

Despite a successful meeting between the Sultan and Wilhelm, the concession for the Baghdad Railway to the German syndicate did not follow immediately. The

⁴⁹ McMurray, Jonathan S. 2001. *Distant ties Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the construction of the Baghdad Railway*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.

<http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=492121>, 27.

⁵⁰ Earle, Edward M. *Turkey, the Great Powers, and the Bagdad Railway: A Study in Imperialism*. New York: Macmillan, 1923., 42.

⁵¹ McMurray, 28.

construction of the Baghdad Railway was not officially approved by Sultan Abdulhamid II until 1903. At that time the Ottoman government gave a concession to the Deutsche Bank to build a railway that would extend to the Persian Gulf.⁵² This concession granted the German Syndicate a time frame of 99 years, and included the incorporation of the sections of the rail, which were already built, “Haidar-Pasha and Eskishehr-Konia.”⁵³

Beginning of construction

The first 200-kilometer section of the railway opened in October 25, 1904 in commemoration of Sultan Abdulhamid’s birthday. This section was built with few problems and the opening was met with great celebration. However, the terrain in this section, which went from Konya-Bulgurlu, was not nearly as challenging as the more mountainous and desolate regions.⁵⁴ The rail for this section required a lot of resources to be transported over difficult terrain with little infrastructure in place in order to do so.

Newspaper articles and travel diaries provide fascinating insights into the construction efforts for the Baghdad railway. The building was the subject of much international scrutiny and many curious travelers and journalists came to observe the building and progress of the rail.

⁵² McMurray, 56.

⁵³ Jastrow, 92.

⁵⁴ McMurray, 56.

End of construction

Between 1908 and 1914, the relationship between the Ottoman government and the Germans changed dramatically. The arrival of the young Turks forced Germany to develop a strategy, which went beyond the personal relationship between Wilhelm and Abdulhamid. Some viewed the German rail project as a colonial threat.⁵⁵ “Young Turks,” is a term “coined by Europeans to refer to the constitutionalist opposition to Abdulhamid.”⁵⁶ In this period, groups of Arabs, Albanians, Jews, Armenians and Greeks criticized the Ottoman elite for “adopting only superficial aspects of Western culture” and demanded that reforms be consistent with Islamic law.⁵⁷ Unrest and instability made it increasingly difficult for the rail to be built, particularly because the Germans relied on multiethnic workers to build the rail, and “by 1914, the Baghdad Railway appeared to have lost its utility for German strategic aims.”⁵⁸ After the war Germany lost all rights to the Baghdad Railway.⁵⁹

Part 2: Perspectives

Dr. George von Siemens (1839 –1901) was the Managing Director of the Deutsche Bank at the time when the syndicate was awarded the concession to build

⁵⁵ McMurray, 102.

⁵⁶ Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire 1908-1918.*, 4.

⁵⁷ Kayali, 22-3.

⁵⁸ McMurray, 102.

⁵⁹ Earle, 301.

the railway. Without Siemens' enthusiasm it is likely that the project would not have taken off for Germany the way that it did. Siemens was "a well-known insider in German financial circles." He "knew his ability to conjure up funds for a distant railway would be limited by public opinion" and recognized the need for Germany to have a strong financial base moving forward with this project.⁶⁰ Siemens worked faithfully "to keep the Baghdad Railway in German hands" for the German Foreign Office, but resigned his position in December 1900 due to poor health. The new director of the Deutsche Bank, Arthur von Gwinner, continued to implement his plan and ultimately became more successful than Siemens.⁶¹

The initial idea for the Railway was presented to Dr. Siemens by Wilhelm von Pressel (1821–1902), and it was originally called, "the Pressel Project." Until Dr. Siemens approved the idea, the main challenge of building the railway was capital and determining the route.

Pressel worked directly with Sultan Abdulhamid and presented a plan for the railroad, arguing that it would be beneficial for the empire as a whole. In 1876, Sultan Abdulhamid approved Pressel's proposed plan for the railroad and granted him an envoy of Turkish officials so that he might travel and do research on the area.⁶² The challenge for Pressel moving forward, however, was finding investors

⁶⁰ McMurray, 22-23; 28.

⁶¹ McMurray, 49.

⁶² McMurray, 19-20.

and financing for his project, and this was more challenging than he originally imagined. “

Sultan Abdulhamid sent Pressel to Germany to muster support among bankers there, yet in spite of his best efforts, prospective investors considered his proposal too risky.”⁶³ When Pressel finally got support for his project from Dr. Siemens and investors at the Deutsche Bank, they took his project and made it their own.

On November 27, 1899, Siemens then director of the Deutsche Bank and president of the Anatolian Railway Company, announced the initial plans for the railway and that the concession had been granted to the German syndicate.⁶⁴ Siemens quipped, “The so-called Baghdad Railway concession is only a piece of paper...for which I paid 200,000 Turkish lira!”⁶⁵

Pressel had wanted to build the railroad for the betterment of the Ottoman Empire, but he was forced to watch from the sidelines as the Deutsche Bank attempted to make this project a purely German enterprise.⁶⁶ Pressel felt betrayed and wrote in 1902,

I have decided to fight for my project against the superior strength of my opponents as long as God gives me strength, until my last breath, like a lioness for her cubs. Because I have the right to call the Anatolian Railway my child.⁶⁷

⁶³ McMurray, 22.

⁶⁴ Morris Jastrow, *The War and the Baghdad Railway*, 84.

⁶⁵ McMurray, 32.

⁶⁶ McMurray, 23.

⁶⁷ McMurray, 23-4

He died shortly after becoming disappointed that his “humanitarian” efforts to help the Ottomans were scorned by German businessmen and politicians.

Sultan Abdulhamid was careful and calculating and was not keen to accept any bid from a country which might be construed as “foreign encroachment on Ottoman domestic affairs... and in light of this, the German Foreign Office continued to claim that the railway was a purely commercial enterprise, run by an unaffiliated international company under German leadership” and was in no way a tool of German expansionism.⁶⁸ The Deutsche Bank group argued that the true strength of the railway was in its ability to strengthen the Ottoman Empire and that Germany and the Ottomans could maintain a powerful partnership.

The process required a lot of patience from the Germans, and Siemens grew impatient waiting for approval for the project and considered forgetting the whole endeavor. “I don’t give a damn about the concession or the whole Baghdad Railway,” he exclaimed.⁶⁹ The cause for the delays was that other proposals were being sent to the Sultan from both British and French investors.

Sultan Abdulhamid II (1842-1918) was Ottoman sultan from 1876 to 1909. In order to understand the nature of the government on the Ottoman side, a little background must be given on the reign of the Sultan known both as the last great

⁶⁸ McMurray, 40-41.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

sultan and vilified as the “red sultan.”⁷⁰ Sultan Abdulhamid II ruled from 1876-1909 and presided over the Ottoman Empire during a period of intense change and crisis.

The Ottoman Empire went bankrupt the year before Abdulhamid took the throne in 1875, and due to a coup d'état, Abdulhamid II became the third Sultan to rule in the year 1876. This led to his intense paranoia and distrust of other Ottoman officials. Despite this deep mistrust of those around him, Abdulhamid II took great effort to restructure and reform the Ottoman government. One of his strategies, in addition to governmental reform, was his pan-Islamic policy. This pan-Islamic strategy, while intending to bring Muslims together and help strengthen the Ottoman Empire as a whole, also served as a form of Ottoman propaganda.⁷¹ Sultan Abdulhamid's pan Islamism was a political tool and campaign to strengthen the Ottoman Empire by gaining support from Muslims around the world. The most tangible result of these efforts can be found in the propaganda for the Hejaz Railway during the 1900s, where the project to connect the holy cities of Mecca and Medina by rail gained enormous sympathy and support from Muslims and Arabs all over the world.⁷²

Sultan Abdulhamid needed an ally who would be able to help provide the Ottoman Empire with financial support as well as provide support in training its

⁷⁰ Benjamin Fortna, “The Reign of Abdulhamid II,” Fleet, Kate, Suraiya Faroqhi, and Reşat Kasaba. *The Cambridge History of Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. p. 38.

⁷¹ Fortna, 47-49.

⁷² Munayyir, Muḥammad ‘Ārif ibn Aḥmad, and Jacob M. Landau, 19-20.

military.⁷³ Sultan Abdulhamid also desired to find an ally outside of his own realm he could both trust and consult with, particularly after he rose to power when his brother Murat V was “forcibly deposed”⁷⁴

Sultan Abdulhamid insisted that the power not be in conflict with his Pan-Islamic movement. His goal was to unify various Islamic communities, and he wanted the development of this railroad to connect Muslims all over the world.⁷⁵ The sultan hoped that this Pan-Islamism would be beneficial to the Ottoman Empire and serve to bolster the power of the Ottoman Empire.

Here are some of the details of the agreement he made with the Germans. Dr. Siemens was certainly pleased with the first part of these terms:

All material imported for the construction of the road was to be free from duty...and [the Germany syndicate had] the privilege of reserving to itself the right to construct and exploit ports of Baghdad, Basra, and only the Persian Gulf,” as well as access to all ports on the Euphrates, Tigris, and the Shatt-el-Arab.⁷⁶

In return for these concessions, the Ottomans demanded that workmen were to be Ottoman subjects, and with the exception of high German officials, “everybody connected with the railway was to wear a fez.”⁷⁷

The geography of the railway was rich with resources including minerals, fuel, and oil, and other raw materials, all of which attracted the attention of the great

⁷³ McMurray, 17.

⁷⁴ McMurray, 16.

⁷⁵ Earle, 64.

⁷⁶ Morrow, 94-5.

⁷⁷ Morrow, 95.

powers of the world.⁷⁸ Before setting out to build the rail, Dr. Siemens sent out an expedition to trace the proposed route of the railway from terminus to terminus in 1899. The group assembled a caravan and travelled for six months through each future terminus of the rail: “Konya, Eregli, Adana, Mersin, Aleppo, Diyarbakir, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra.”⁷⁹

The main obstacle that the caravan found was with the lawlessness of the region. Much of the rail, which went through the Ottoman Empire’s peripheral provinces, was not controlled well by the center. This issue was brought to the attention of the Ottoman government, and Abdulhamid used it to his advantage in order to reassert control from the center.

It became clear that the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Germany was becoming increasingly reliant on the success of the railway’s construction. “On November 23, 1903, the Imperial Ottoman Government took out its first loan on the Baghdad Railway for the amount of 54 million francs with 4-percent interest payable in 98 years.”⁸⁰ The Ottoman government needed the railway to be a success.

The English traveler, David Fraser, who traveled the length of the Baghdad Railway, recorded his journey in a diary and was surprised at the lack of politics displayed by Germans involved in the railway project. Fraser published his diaries and account of his journey along the Berlin-Baghdad railway in 1909. In his work,

⁷⁸ Earle, 5.

⁷⁹ McMurray, 43-44.

⁸⁰ McMurray, 52.

Short Cut to India: The Record of a Journey along the Route of the Baghdad Railway,

Fraser explained that his goals in following the proposed railway route of the Baghdad railway were “to endeavor to discover what Germany has to gain by construction of the railway, and what England stands to lose.”⁸¹ Fraser finally reached Baghdad in 1908 and finished his book just at the time when the Young Turks took hold of the government.

Fraser commented that

Man and railways have a trick of reacting upon each other, to their mutual benefit... if certain elements are not favorable man may be brought to a railway, or a railway brought to man, without there ensuing any material gain in prosperity.⁸²

Fraser also found the multiethnic nature of the rail to be interesting as he wrote that

One hears much of German commercial enterprise in Turkey, and particularly in connection with the Anatolian Railway... but on the railway itself there is little to indicated Teutonic surroundings. All the police are Turkish, all the minor officials Turks, Greeks, and Armenians...throughout the whole of three days’ journey I saw only a single German, the engineer for the Baghdad section.⁸³

Fraser simply assumed that the German enterprise was “cheap” and caring “first for their own pockets and next for Germany.”⁸⁴ Fraser’s account provides many fascinating insights, including a comparison of the timetables for the British steamships and the Baghdad railway to transport goods.

⁸¹ Fraser, David. *The Short Cut to India*. S.l: s.n., 1909, 31-2.

⁸² Fraser, 296.

⁸³ Fraser, 16.

⁸⁴ Fraser, 16.

Fraser explained that out of the three countries primarily interested in the Railway, Turkey, Great Britain, and Germany, the British are quite clearly getting the better end of the deal by not being involved. According to Fraser, “all the benefits conferred by railway, in the shape of construction expenditure to laborers, settlement of districts now insecure, increase of cultivation, and general stimulation of commerce will be counterbalanced by the capital loss.”⁸⁵ The complete line of rail will be 2400 kilometers (12 sections), each costing a loan of 54,000,000 francs or 26,000,000 notes. This is a significant when considering the development of the railroad because, particularly during the early stages, the cost-benefit analysis was ambiguous for the British.

From the British point of view, there were three main considerations that Fraser described as commercial, political, and strategic. Fraser proved with a chart of timetables that British Gulf shipping “has nothing to fear from railway competition, and that our trade is unlikely to be affected by an enterprise from which economic results are not expected.”⁸⁶ Fraser firmly believed in his travel diaries that “Germany has much to gain from the Baghdad railway, and much to lose,” and that “we have no other wish in regard to Turkey but that she may be strong and prosperous and progressive” because she is an asset for trade and British market development in the Mediterranean.⁸⁷ The financial risk of participating in the Baghdad Railway project for the British, according to Fraser was enormous. By

⁸⁵ Fraser, 319.

⁸⁶ Fraser, 319-20.

⁸⁷ Fraser, 324.

leaving the “Baghdad scheme” to Germany, Fraser quite happily determined that all of the risk would fall upon Germany.⁸⁸

As one might expect Germany’s ambassador to the Ottoman Porte, Adolf Freiherr Marschall von Bieberstein (1842-1912) had a different perspective. He was determined to make his vision of the Baghdad Railway as “a tool of German *Weltpolitik*.” Marschall wrote in his diaries that he wanted to “blaze the trail for Germanness, especially the German language, in the regions through which that railway will pass.”⁸⁹

Dr. Siemens and Dr. von Gwinner, the two brains behind the project, recognized the challenge of being the sole financiers of the project and Dr. von Gwinner wrote an article in 1909, “*The Baghdad Railway and the Question of British Cooperation*” in which he expressed the need to be open to international involvement and partnership on the project.⁹⁰

Not all British agreed with the assessment of David Fraser. Indeed, British documents on the subject of the railroad explain that British officials had desired that a British company should gain the concession to build the railroad and wanted to have a share in the project at all cost. As Morrow explains,

The political aspect of railway plans in the Near East might have been permanently kept in the background. The European situation would have assumed an entirely different coloring, if England and Germany had not

⁸⁸ Fraser, 324.

⁸⁹ McMurray, 55.

⁹⁰ Morrow, 96.

clashed in the East over the Baghdad Railway, as happened immediately upon the announcement of the convention of 1902-1903.⁹¹

Sir Nicholas Roderick O'Connor (1843-1908) British Ambassador in Constantinople, in the letter already cited above to the Marquess of Lansdowne written in June 25, 1901 expresses concern that not enough of the share of the railroad was going to be given to British Syndicate and that German and French groups were also positioning themselves to be granted the commission for the railroad.⁹² In terms of British policy, "for a decade, O'Connor and his staff were the main interface between the British policy making establishment in all its guises (including the Foreign Office, the India Office, the government of India and the British Agency in Egypt), and the inner workings of Abdulhamid's administration in its twilight years."⁹³

Later, in 1903 when negotiations were fierce over who might be granted the commission to build the railways, Mr. A.J. Balfour stated to the House of Commons on the subject of the railway that "the proposed railway is not... to be a German railway."⁹⁴ According to Morrow,

It was felt in England that if, as Napoleon is said to have remarked, Antwerp in the hands of a great continental power was a pistol leveled at the English coast, Baghdad and the Persian Gulf in the hands of Germany (or any other strong power) would be a 42-centimetre gun pointed at India.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Morrow, 89.

⁹² Gooch, G P, and Harold W. V. Temperley. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914. London: H.M.S.O, 1927. Volume II, June 25, 1901. Page 176, no. 203.

⁹³ Burman, 21.

⁹⁴ Gooch, G P, and Harold W. V. Temperley. British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914. London: H.M.S.O, 1927. Volume II, pg. 186 No. 215.

⁹⁵ Morrow, 97.

This sharp controversy only evolved from the 1903 grant of preference by the Ottoman Empire to a German syndicate over a British syndicate to build the Baghdad Railway.

On the German side of things, the German public was supportive of the project. As explained by A.J. P. Taylor in his work, *The Course of German History*, Germany's renewed colonial ambitions in the late 1890s led the Reich to support "the project for a German railway across Turkey-in-Asia. Taylor explains that this project "sprung from the German Foreign Office" where the "imperial bureaucrats" welcomed "a manifestation of German power" but failed to provide capital for its construction.

As previously explained, France and England were not inclined to support a project which would lead to German glory.⁹⁶

According to Taylor, the Baghdad Railway was a pan-German project which helped to propel Germany toward economic growth and assure Germany, as Kaiser Wilhelm II declared in 1901, "a place in the sun."⁹⁷

Interestingly enough, Dr. Siemens insisted that his goals with the railroad were not political and he offered to internationalize the enterprise.⁹⁸ Morrow explains that it need not be assumed, "that the German syndicate was in league with the Pan-Germanic movement. Capitalists—even though they be patriotic Germans—

⁹⁶ Taylor, A. J. P. *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History Since 1815*. London: Routledge, 2001., 186-7.

⁹⁷ Taylor, 171.

⁹⁸ Morrow, 103.

are not apt to be carried away by political visions.”⁹⁹ Dr. von Gwinner and the German government were not always in agreement.

The conflict over the development of the Railway illustrates the way in which European powers concerned themselves with colonial interests in the East. Growing control and influence in the East by any one power was seen as threatening and labeled as dangerous. France’s stake in the railway was linked to its development of railways in Syria, and a French designed the railway from Beirut to Damascus.¹⁰⁰ The initial problem Germany had with the development of the railway was with Russia, who opposed the first plans of the route because of her own interests in the region.¹⁰¹ Russia felt that the rail threatened its territory in eastern Asia Minor.¹⁰²

Insight into the British discussions about the Railway are plentiful in the volumes of British Documents leading to the Origins of War compiled in the official *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*. Edited by Harold W.V. Temperly, the collected documents illustrate the colorful discussions the British were involved with surrounding the Baghdad Railway.

Herr Gwinner of the Deutsche Bank was trying to make the railway an international endeavor at all costs and desired to stay in communication with the British. The British documents include drafts of letters sent from Gwinner to the Marquess of Lansdowne in which Gwinner details plans of the percent of shares that

⁹⁹ Morrow, 119.

¹⁰⁰ Morrow, 104-5.

¹⁰¹ Morrow, 89.

¹⁰² Morrow 110.

the British, French, and German groups would have as capital in the Baghdad Railway Company, allotting equal twenty-five percent shares to each of the three countries.¹⁰³ Gwinner wrote,

I beg to state that myself and my friends will use their best endeavours to bring about the control and working of the Anatolian Railway Company's line from Haida Pasha to Konia as part of an internationally controlled railway line from sea to sea.¹⁰⁴

Gwinner continued by noting that this undertaking would be dependent on several conditions and assurances.

According to Gwinner, the British and the British group would agree upon three basic terms and conditions for the railway. First they would agree that Turkey be allowed to increase her customs revenue. Second, that the railway would secure as large a share as possible of the Indian mail and passenger service as soon as a route shall be established that is shorter "via the Persian Gulf" than "via the Suez."¹⁰⁵ Third, that the British would agree to provide all terminal facilities required at "Koweit" per the Ottoman's request. This letter illustrates the variety of matters that would come before Parliament.

These conditions, such as discussions of increases of the Turkish Tariff for increased revenue to the Ottoman government, were all discussed as possibly being detrimental to British interests. The reason for this was that the railway was intended to serve as a key player for transportation both of goods and military in

¹⁰³ Gooch, G P, and Harold W. V. Temperley. *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*. London: H.M.S.O, 1927. Volume II, March 10, 1903 Mr. Gwinner to Lord Revelstoke, No. 212, p. 184.

¹⁰⁴ *British Documents*, Volume II. March 10, 1903 Gwinner to Revelstoke. P. 184.

¹⁰⁵ *British Documents*, Volume II. March 10, 1903 Gwinner to Revelstoke. P. 184.

the Eastern theater. An internationalization of the Ottoman Empire played a significant role for the British in terms of economic policy and the economic “trend toward the East.”¹⁰⁶ However, not being involved in the project was argued to be even more detrimental to British interests.

Even a policy of neutrality regarding the rail line was considered. In a memorandum by the Marquess of Lansdowne entitled “The Baghdad Railway,” he mused,

Why need we declare ourselves, the link may not be built, or may, at all events, not be finished for many a long day. Do not let us announce at this stage that we will on certain conditions agree.¹⁰⁷

However Lansdowne added that the War Office and Director of Military intelligence expressed their opinions on the subject and argued that “it would be a great mistake to oppose the project, which we ought, on the contrary, to encourage to the best of our power, provided we can acquire a proper share in the control of the railway and of its outlet on the Persian Gulf.”¹⁰⁸

This argument represents a key theme in British thoughts toward the project and highlights the uncertainty felt by the British government about the project. The sheer cost of the project was enormous, but it was generally accepted that the

¹⁰⁶ Jastrow, 145.

¹⁰⁷ British Documents on the Origins of War, Volume II, April 14, 1903. Memorandum by the Marquess of Lansdowne, The Baghdad Railway, no. 216, p. 187.

¹⁰⁸ British Documents on the Origins of War, Volume II, April 14, 1903. Memorandum by the Marquess of Lansdowne, The Baghdad Railway, no. 216, p. 188.

investment might also act as a deterrent against other nations monopolizing the area.

Of far greater concern for the British, was the question about what the Russians thought about the railway. The British wondered if they intended to build their own. Lansdowne wrote in a confidential letter to Sir C. Scott that he offhandedly asked the Russian Ambassador if he had noticed anything interesting in the news about the Baghdad Railway question. His Excellence, the Russian Ambassador noted that the Russian Government never liked the scheme and did not approve of Germany having “dangerous preponderance in Asia Minor.”¹⁰⁹

The plan for the German Company to possess control of a key part of the railway from Haidar Pasha to Konia, and then having the rest of the rail was not enough of a guarantee of impartial treatment for the British. For the Germans would then, “hold the key of the door by which the through traffic must pass” and this represented a key consideration and drawback from the standpoint of the British.¹¹⁰

Upon hearing that the concession for the railway was given to the German syndicate alone, Dr. Gwinner, expressed his regret that negotiations had not resulted in British participation in the Railway. Dr. Gwinner cited the sharp clamor against British involvement in the project from the press. Lansdowne agreed that

¹⁰⁹ British Documents on the Origins of War. Volume II April 14, 1903. The Marquess of Lansdowne to Sir C. Scott no. 217, p.188.

¹¹⁰ British Documents on the Origins of War. Volume II April 28, 1903 Sir N. O’Conor to the Marquess of Lansdowne, no. 221, p.191-2.

the “outcry against the scheme had the effect of choking off the British financiers” for the project.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Railways which often serve to connect people and nations and act as “mediums of exchange” for goods, capital, people, ideas can also become sources of conflict and destruction.¹¹² Trade routes often become “arenas of imperial friction” and enhance rivalries.¹¹³ For example, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli’s purchase of the Suez Canal brought the empire to the verge of war and Russia’s Trans-Siberian Railway ended with Russia at war with Japan.¹¹⁴

The Baghdad Railway project became a leading imperial problem in the twentieth century. The geography of the Railway made it a prime location for colonial interests in the weakening territories of the Ottoman Empire and as a short cut to valuable trading routes and diplomatic connections in the East. However, the cost and difficulties of constructing the railway led to uncertainty and conflict within the diplomatic and business communities of all of the countries involved.

¹¹¹ British Documents on the Origins of War. Volume II December 15, 1903, Sir N. O’Conor to the Marquess of Lansdowne, no.224, p.195-6.

¹¹² Morrow, 115.

¹¹³ Earle, 3.

¹¹⁴ Earle, 3-4.

The historical debate about the Railway includes many questions. Was the Railway the single largest factor leading up to World War I? In his work *The War and the Baghdad Railway*, Morris Jastrow Jr. argues that:

...the Baghdad Railway will be found to be the largest single contributing factor in bringing on the war, because through it more than any other cause, the mutual distrust among European Powers has been nurtured, until the entire atmosphere of international diplomacy became vitiated.¹¹⁵

Did the railway represent itself as a tool of German imperialism or a “friendship mission” designed to benefit the Ottomans and Turco-German relations?¹¹⁶ Did Germany seek out the railway project in order to take advantage of the Ottoman Empire in terms of location and finances? Did Germany desire to use this opportunity as a means to expand trade? Or rather, did it strengthen the Ottoman Empire?

At the dawn of World War I in 1914, the Baghdad railway project was only partially completed. It was not until the 1940s during the Second World War that “the last unfinished section of the original ‘Berlin to Baghdad’ railroad (in Iraq, south of Mosul) was completed, and through-train service all the way from the Bosphorus to Baghdad finally became a reality.”¹¹⁷ By then the perspectives from the early twentieth century had altered dramatically, and there were entirely new countries involved. The completion and eventual fate of the railroad after the 1940s is a topic for further research.

¹¹⁵ Morrow, 115.

¹¹⁶ McMurray, 5.

¹¹⁷ Trumpener, 316.

Future Research

The study of the Berlin to Baghdad railway opens up the subject of other railways built during the first part of the twentieth century. Why were they built and by whom? One example is the Hedjaz line, which was funded by public contributions.

While Abdulhamid II desired for the Baghdad Railway to be his most strategic endeavor, he “supplemented the Baghdad system with the famous Hedjaz Railway –from Damascus to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca—one of the achievements of which the...sultan was most proud.”¹¹⁸ The engineers who worked on the construction of this railroad were Italians, and nearly seven hundred thousand people worked on this railroad. The railway was only completed to Medina on August 31, 1908 and never reached Mecca.

Another aspect of the railways besides the negotiations for their building and financing was also the difficulty of maintaining them. One account describes several types of challenge.

Even before World War I (1914–18) the Bedouins of the adjacent desert areas attacked the railway, which challenged their control over the pilgrims’ route to the holy places from the north. When the Arabs of the Hejaz revolted against Turkish rule in 1916, the track between Ma‘ān and Medina was put

¹¹⁸ Earle, 21.

out of operation by Arab raids, largely inspired by the British military strategist T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).¹¹⁹

Not only the building but also the destruction of railways in the Middle East is a subject worthy of additional research.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/259808/Hejaz-Railway>

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